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SUGGESTIONS

FOR A

CONSERVATIVE AND POPULAR REFORM

IN THE

COMMONS HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT.

BY

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LONDON:

PUBLISHED FOR HATCHARD, PICCADILLY;
AND RIDGWAY, PICCADILLY.

1850.

MACINTOSH, PRINTER,
GREAT NEW-STREET, LONDON.

SUGGESTIONS,

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EIGHTEEN years have now elapsed since the Reform Bill became the law of the land,—a measure which, in its passage through the Legislature, shook the institutions of this country to their foundation, and was, in fact, a peaceful revolution. The magnitude of this change was justified by its proposers on the ground that it was necessary to “satisfy” the people. Everything was sacrificed for that object—theory, principle, prescription: it was to be “a permanent settlement of a great constitutional question.”*

For some years this doctrine of permanency, or, as it was sometimes called, “finality,” was adhered to. It is, however, already abandoned. Lord John Russell distinctly points to the time, when “the wisdom of “the House of Commons shall decide that it is necessary “to make a further extension of the suffrage, and when “the 10% value shall no longer be the limit for the right “of voting in this country.” (Feb. 28, 1850.) “Whenever we propose a plan,” said the Noble Lord on the same occasion, “I think it should not be a substitute “for the Reform Bill, but a supplement to that Act. “My opinion is certainly that the Reform Act *was*

* Lord John Russell's Letter to the Electors of Stroud, p. 5.

“ adapted to the institutions of this country—*was* adapted
 “ to the wishes of the people. I believe, with Honour-
 “ able Gentlemen, that the people of this country have,
 “ since the Reform Bill was introduced, made great
 “ advances in knowledge and information.”

The Reform Bill, then, “*was* adapted:” Lord John did not venture to affirm that it was so any longer. Yet eighteen short years form but a brief period in the history of a nation. It would seem, however, that the Noble Lord thinks it long enough to have enabled the people “ to make such advances in knowledge and information,” as that a fresh change will soon become advisable: he openly avows, that he is contemplating the moment when he may propose a plan whereby “ the 10*l.* value “ shall no longer be the limit for the right of voting “ in this country.”

Such, then, are the opinions now entertained by the First Minister, of the Act, of which he was one of the authors, and such are the notions which he has formed as to the best means for its future improvement. On the occasion when these intentions were avowed, ninety-six Members recorded their votes for an *immediate* alteration.

Meanwhile, what are the sentiments which prevail outside the House with respect to this celebrated Act? Large bodies of men are organized for the express object of getting it remodelled. They find as much fault with the constitution of the reformed House of Commons as ever they did with the unreformed one. Many ably conducted periodicals are chiefly devoted to procure a great change in the national representation; and those publications, which might have been expected to support a system which they were very instrumental in establishing, treat the present House of Commons with marked contempt. For instance, “The Examiner” (July 7, 1849)

says: "The fault of our representative system lies much more at the bottom than the top—much more with the electors than the elected. . . . As it is, the representative body, with all its failures, is better than the constituent body,—the corrupters lest corrupt than the corrupted." "The Times," when commenting on Mr. Roebuck's return for Sheffield, observes, (May 7, 1849): "As a phenomenon in the history of Parliament we cannot afford to dispense with the single exception [Mr. Roebuck] to the *consequences* of the Reform Bill, which has left the representation of the people to men with large purses, or accommodating consciences—to men who will bribe with money, and those who will bribe with servility—railway directors, or platform declaimers." Such are the opinions of those who advocated Reform.

On the other hand, the original opponents of the measure, and many even of its original supporters, who have become Conservative, stand by the present system, not because they are satisfied with it—not because they think it "works well," but because they apprehend lest any further change in the same direction would be one with which they would be less satisfied, and whose working would probably prove still worse than the existing system.

It is surely, then, contrary to all past experience, and reasonable probability, that a system, thus powerfully assailed on the one side, and thus weakly defended on the other, should be destined for much longer duration. Already a Bill for Ireland has been brought in by the Government, lowering the existing franchise; and, it is generally admitted, that should that Bill become law, a similar lowering of the franchise will take place in Great Britain.

It requires, therefore, no great political sagacity to foresee that at present all things are tending to a change, and that that change, when it does come, will be in the same direction as before; the Constitution will be made more democratical; "the 10*l.* value will no longer be the "limit for the right of voting in this country."

Now we are told by "The Times" that "the *consequences* of the Reform Bill have been to leave the "representation of the people, to men who will bribe, "either with servility, or with money"—nay more, we are told that Mr. Roebuck alone, stands out "the single exception" to this general rule. Surely, however, this is far too sweeping a condemnation: if, indeed, it were a just one, and that the House of Commons did not contain more than one member, against whom "servility or bribery" could not be justly imputed, long ago it must have been swept away by the resistless blast of public indignation.

Assuredly there can be found no inconsiderable number, amongst its members, who are at once both honest and independent. Nevertheless it is but too true, that the *tendency* of the system is to produce those very effects, which "The Times" unhesitatingly affirms that it has actually already produced. For few members, who would honestly confess to the influences by which they have been assailed, could deny, that in a greater or less degree their return to Parliament was secured by means of which they little approved; still less would they be able to assert that, since that return, their legislative discretion had not been fettered, in a way from which it ought to be free.

Thus members are prevented from acting upon their honest convictions: and thus, instead of deriving weight from the constituencies which they represent, the weight of their own intrinsic value is not inconsiderably diminished by the character of their constituencies. They are

either suspected of undue "servility," or, they are suspected of "bribery," whereby the *reality* of honest patriotism is at once destroyed.

Take, for instance, the present First Minister, now sitting for the great City of London. Who can doubt but that if he sat for his own family borough of Tavistock, his actions and policy would be less exposed to suspicion? He has indignantly denied being influenced in introducing the Jew Bill, by the peculiar circumstances connected with the representation of the City; and, as a gentleman, holding the first station under the Crown, his solemn asseveration surely ought to be entitled to belief: yet with how small a portion of credence has this declaration been met! How few there are who will avow their belief, considering how undeniably convenient it was to a person in his position to bring forward such a measure, that he was not induced by that convenience to lay his Jew Bill upon the table of the House? Other measures, far more pressingly important, were, it is said, laid aside for the purpose of pressing it: for,—the Parliamentary colleague, who had materially assisted his return, was unable to take his seat; gratitude for the past, hope for the future, seemed to the public eye, the actuating motives of his conduct; and if, therefore, his assertion has not been believed, as it ought, it is rather the fault of the position in which the system has placed him, than of the man himself.

Mr. Canning and Sir Robert Peel, both well knew the value of being unfettered in their policy, by the claims or interference of a large constituency. The former resigned Liverpool, when he succeeded Lord Londonderry in 1822, the latter stuck to Tamworth, although more than once invited to represent other, and more important places.

It is not, however, Ministers of the Crown alone,—all

members are necessarily hampered by representing large constituencies. In the unreformed House of Commons, a large body of men were sent to carry out great *principles* to the best of their ability; in the reformed one they are sent to carry out specifick *measures*, which their constituents think will prove beneficial to themselves. The close-borough system might have been an anomaly—might have been at variance with the theory of the Constitution—and might have been, nay, doubtless was, grossly abused, by some of those who had controul over those boroughs: but it was, for all that, not without its counter-vailing advantages. Not one man of real greatness and renown, who has ever sat in the British Parliament, but has owed his introduction there to a *rotten* borough. Young men of talent were then sure to find some one who would bring them in: many of those, in whose hands these boroughs were, diligently sought out the ablest men, in order to give weight and encouragement to the *principles* which they themselves professed. In those days speakers were comparatively few: one or two volumes of Hansard contained the debates of the Session; now, five or six are the average numbers; the publick time was not then consumed in showy and unprofitable discussions, and, with few exceptions, the men who sat there, held a high position in society, irrespective of their seats in the House of Commons; and, provided business was carried on, in the way which they approved, they neither sought to gain a spurious notoriety, nor deemed it necessary to gratify their constituents by any needless oratorical display.

The close-borough representatives were, in reality, the ballast of the unreformed House of Commons. The present House of Commons is easily swayed on one side or the other by the breath of popular opinion. It is important then to inquire what constitutes that popular

opinion which thus sways the present House of Commons? Now, on every important question, there are sure to be two antagonistick parties, with their minds firmly made up: between these two there is equally sure to be a more numerous party than either—the waverers, men who have no fixed principles, no decided opinions, but are certain to be actuated by the varying circumstances of the moment. According as this middle body floats towards either side, it gives, for the time, a preponderance to that party to which it adheres. The Reform Act itself was thus carried. Not far from one half of the then existing constituencies voted against it: but the middle party just made the difference; thus, for example, out of one hundred votes, forty-five being ranged on each side, the remaining ten would turn the balance either way. It was thus that an overwhelming majority of representatives were returned in favour of the Bill, and the erroneous impression consequently went forth, that an overwhelming majority of the voters were also in its favour.

Now every one who knows anything of political life in this country, must be well aware of the sort of machinery by which this portion of the publick mind is acted upon; how often opinions are created by clamour, and acquiescence obtained through fear rather than through conviction. No one who knows anything of the real history of the Reform Act, believes that it met with the deliberate approbation of those who passed it, or even of the majority of the English people. Advantage was taken of the excitement and alarm occasioned by the overthrow of Charles X. The extraordinary spectacle of the defeat of a regular army by the citizens,—of a monarch, surrounded by his guards, slowly quitting his dominions, although still possessing an army, which had not been proved to be unfaithful to him; anarchy and riot prevail-

ing throughout the rural districts in England, the blaze of burning ricks illuminating the firmament far and wide; the Ministry refusing to expose the king to the danger (the danger !!) of dining in the City of London; the insecurity felt by every man in his own house; all these things struck a panic into men's hearts, and made them too ready to listen to a Government, who told them that their only chance of safety lay in conceding to the "people," with a good grace, what it would not be possible much longer to withhold. The Reform Act was, therefore, wrung from a reluctant Legislature by practising upon its fears. Had the close boroughs been as theoretically defensible, as they were practically useful, it would have been found impossible to destroy them. But they were destroyed, and thus was the ballast of the unreformed House of Commons got rid of, and none other was shipped in its room to steady the vessel in its renovated state. Every constituency was changed; hardly one was left to return a member, who might be free from the predominating controul of a fickle popular opinion. There can be no doubt that Lord John Russell is correct when he says, that the House of Commons, thus constituted, has "responded quickly and readily to publick opinion." But the really important question is, has this responsiveness resulted in an increase of publick happiness and prosperity?

Mr. Joseph Hume maintains that every man should have his share in sanctioning the laws by which "he is governed, and that his having it, or not having it, constitutes the sole difference between a freeman and a slave." (June 21, 1848.) Five out of every six male adults in this country, he says, have not the right of voting, therefore the great mass of our population are slaves. Be it so; in France, then, where universal suffrage prevails, all are freemen; in France, where no man can live in his own

house, or move out of his own village, without a passport from the police ; where such a law as the *Habeas Corpus* Act is unknown ; and where the whole face of the country is divided into military districts, in order, by enormous armies, to repress every attempt at popular outbreak. Which, then, is the freest of the two, the English slave, or the French freeman ?

But, according to Mr. Hume's definition, the right of voting will not always make a man free. Supposing that he supports a defeated candidate, and the representative of his opponents helps to pass laws which he disapproves, then it can in no sense be said, that he "sanctions the laws by which he is governed." Universal suffrage would thus leave a large minority of the people "Slaves." Yet these are the arguments gravely put forth in such a deliberative assembly as the Commons of England !

Further, Mr. Joseph Hume tells us, that "the people have no confidence in the representation." (June 21, 1848.) Mr. Cobden affirms, in the same debate, that "the present representation is a sham." Be it so. What, then, is the cause of this phenomenon ? Is it because the wishes and opinions of the people have been disregarded ? or, because, having been too "quickly and readily" obeyed, they have not resulted in securing their happiness and contentment ? Is it that they have been indulged with the sweetmeats, for which they have clamoured, but that those delicacies have cloyed their appetites, and left them in greater discomfort than before ?

On this point what say two unexceptionable witnesses in the recent debate (March 16, 1850) on the Budget ? The Chancellor of the Exchequer says : "Look at the 'Reports of the Factory Commissioners, of the Mines' Commissioners, of the Sanitary Commissioners ; look at 'almost the last Report which was laid upon your table

“from the gentlemen who were appointed to inquire into
 “the law of settlement, and I am afraid that we must be
 “driven to confess, that the richer have improved in a far
 “greater degree than the poorer.” Mr. Heald, the
 Member for Stockport, said, that “he had been deeply
 “struck with the remark of the Chancellor of the Ex-
 “chequer, that he could not congratulate the country
 “at large upon the fact that the condition of the industrial
 “classes had kept pace with the increase of the national
 “wealth. He confessed that, for the last twenty years, he
 “himself had had a painful impression of that fact on
 “his own mind.”

But, it may be said, these reports and observations relate to the very class who have no voice in choosing the national representatives. Be it so. That privilege, then, has been vested in the class above them,—the 10% householders, the shopkeepers in the towns. Well, then, they have had the game in their own hands; they, of course, are prospering. What, then, is the testimony of the same gentleman, Mr. Heald, on this point? There is not a man in the House better capable of giving accurate information on the subject, none who has had better opportunities of judging, none less prone to exaggeration, or possessing a sounder and more unprejudiced judgment. He, on the same occasion, “appealed to the representatives
 “of the boroughs, whether the shopkeepers in the towns,
 “who were the backbone that united the head to the feet,
 “were not the most suffering portion of the country.” It is quite clear, therefore, that the possession of the elective franchise does not secure prosperity to its possessors, since those who have it are the “most suffering portion” of the community.

It cannot be truly said that their wishes have been disregarded, for unquestionably Lord John Russell is right

when he said, (June 21, 1848,) that “ No one who regards
 “ the changes which have been made since the reform
 “ of the representation took place, and how readily those
 “ changes were adopted by the House, when the voice of
 “ the people was clearly ascertained, will say, that the
 “ House of Commons has not responded quickly and
 “ readily to publick opinion.”

It was in defending the existing House of Commons against Mr. Joseph Hume that Lord John uttered the above words. In the same speech, he subsequently enumerated the changes to which he referred. That some of those changes were highly beneficial,—such as the opening of the China trade, the commutation of tithes, the penny postage, and some of the alterations in the Tariff few would be disposed to deny; but, that they would not have been made by an unreformed House of Commons is an hypothesis totally irreconcilable with the spirit of the legislation which marked the ten years preceding the Reform Bill.

To some, however, of the changes which Lord John enumerates, as having been made in obedience to “ publick opinion,” it is more than probable an unreformed House of Commons would not have consented. For instance, the abolition of Slavery, and the incurring a debt of twenty millions for the sake of getting rid of a name, are measures to which the unreformed House of Commons would probably have hesitated long before it gave its consent. Before the Reform Act, the House had pledged itself, by formal resolutions, to improve the condition of the slave, and to prepare him for that state of freedom, in which it was ultimately hoped to place him. Great progress had been made towards these objects. The condition of the slave had ceased to be one in which he was exposed to cruelty, or any serious hardship. In

some respects his condition was preferable to English, in every respect to Irish, labourers. The time need not have been far distant, when, fit for liberty, he might have been set free, without damage to his owner, and without so heavy an expense to England. Still, it was, in obedience to a noble and generous impulse, that the deed was done, and the sacrifice was made; and let all honour be given to the Reformed House of Commons, by whom the measure was accomplished! But the abolition of Slavery is not the only measure affecting Slavery, on which that House “has responded quickly and readily “to publick opinion.” It being supposed to be “clearly “ascertained,” that “the voice of the people” was for having their sugar as cheap as possible, the same Reformed House of Commons, which had so nobly, yet so lavishly, sacrificed twenty millions to abolish the name of Slavery within the precincts of the British dominions, did deliberately pass a law, in spite of the most solemn warnings, whereby they gave not only the greatest encouragement to the prolongation of Slavery in foreign lands, but also gave to that far worse horror, the *Slave Trade*, an impetus, whereby it has been increased in cruelty and extent, beyond the record of any former years. Moreover, by the same measure, our own West Indian Colonies have been utterly ruined.

It is not to be believed that an unreformed House of Commons would have acted so inconsistent and discreditable a part: destroying all the good moral effect of their former measure, and confirming the too prevalent belief, amongst foreign nations, that the original manumission of our Negro slaves was not the result of honest integrity of purpose, but was some deep-laid scheme for the promotion, in some way or other best known to ourselves, of our own selfish interests and advancement.

Neither is it likely that an unreformed House of Commons, after having (as Lord John Russell admits) "placed the West Indian Islands at a great disadvantage by the abolition of Slavery in 1833," (March 20, 1850,) would first have broken faith with the planters, by violating the agreement respecting the apprenticeship, made at the period of the abolition; and then, for the sake of cheapening sugar a fraction of a penny per lb., would it have given a fresh "blow" (that is Lord John's own word) to a great and important interest, still staggering under the original "blow," but just beginning to give symptoms of rallying from its effects.

Take, again, the entire repeal of the Corn Laws: that measure, says the First Minister, "shows, at any rate, that, when considerable popular agitation existed, when public meetings were held, and a great cry for change arose, the House of Commons did not refuse to listen to the voice of the people, but on the contrary, completely, and at once, effected the change which was asked for."

Now Lord John does not pretend to assert, that this vast change in our fiscal policy was made by the House of Commons, because the majority of its members believed that it would prove beneficial to the country. No, he honestly and truly ascribes the change to its real sources, "popular agitation," "public meetings," and "a great cry for change." It is not probable that an unreformed House of Commons would have been thus intimidated into passing that measure. What may be its ultimate effect yet remains to be seen: but there can be no doubt that, at present, it has been a source of serious embarrassment and distress, to the most important interest in the Empire. The agriculturists were at first told, as the West Indians had been before them, that all which they had to do, was

to apply more capital to their land, and to carry out extensively their improvements; but now they are told, by the Lord President of the Council, that it is a "great experiment;" prices, says the Chancellor of the Exchequer, have continued lower than was expected; the Government won't venture to commit themselves to an opinion as to what they may be "in future." But, gracious heaven! is such an interest as the agricultural interest of this country, on which millions depend for their existence, a fit subject for a "great experiment?" A "great experiment" has been tried in the West Indies, and it has brought about ruin the most complete: what if this "great experiment" at home should eventuate in ruin too? What, if, in order to avert such ruin,—which would be not of one interest, but of the nation, a return to protection should be proposed, and a fierce strife set up between contending classes? The most complete ultimate success would afford no justification for the risks which have been run. Success is no excuse for the gambler, who hazards the ruin of himself and family on a single throw.

The truth was, the then First Minister and the Members of the House of Commons were too much under the influence of popular clamour, the one to propose, or the other to adopt any wise or moderate scheme. The Corn-law which the former brought in, in 1841, was a law so ill constructed, as to be sure of failing in its intended operation, whenever a wet season occurred, and the quarters of corn, according as they were well or ill harvested, varied materially in price. At the time of its introduction, the Premier was warned by one, if not more, of his Cabinet colleagues, that in such a contingency, his "sliding scale" would fail to "slide:" and a very simple remedy, viz., that of making the quarters of corn which regulated the averages consist

of so much weight, instead of so much bulk—was pointed out to him as an efficient counteraction to the defect. He, however, disregarded the suggestion; and the evil came upon him just as he was forewarned it would do. The “slide” stuck fast at the high duty: so that Sir Robert Peel had to contend with a law which would not work—an impending famine in Ireland—a press terrifying him with its threats of personal responsibility—and a “League” denouncing vengeance if he hesitated or delayed to sweep away the fabric which his own hands had raised. Backed only by a House of Commons, so exposed to popular influence,—with no body in it of disinterested Members on whom he could depend, to stand between the towns and the country—with none to afford him the aid of an impartial and effectual, because unsuspected, support,—he had neither the ability nor the firmness to contend with the difficulties which beset him. He accordingly threw over the principles which he had previously advocated during the whole of his long publick career: he ruined for ever his character as a Statesman: he bowed down before a man immeasurably his inferior, and conceded all and everything to clamour and agitation.

Never did the unreformed House of Commons witness so painful and humiliating a scene, as when, the First Minister of the Crown, yielding to “the voice of the “people,” having avowed his intention to repeal the Corn Laws, the representatives of the people, backed the bitter taunts of Mr. Disraeli by derisive and insulting cheers, issuing, with the exception of the Treasury bench, from every other bench in the House!

The demand for Reform was ushered in by two others of a very fascinating kind. “Peace, Reform, and Retrenchment,” were, it is believed, the first words

uttered by Lord Grey, in the closet of his Sovereign. How, then, has Retrenchment been carried out? For the first few years, while Lord Grey was in office, there was very considerable reduction; but when his controlling influence was gone, the expenditure of the country increased far beyond the point at which it was previously to the Reform Act. A vacillating inconsistency has marked throughout the proceedings of the House of Commons.

“ I will tell my Honourable Friend,” said one who knew it well, “ that I have no confidence in the “ persevering, reflecting, systematick economy of the “ House of Commons. I know the House is very apt “ to have hot and cold fits of saving. That I know. I “ know that, at one time, the House of Commons will “ be decidedly in favour, I will not say of a lavish “ expenditure, but of a considerable expenditure, and “ that at another time it will be decidedly in favour of a “ sudden and precipitate retrenchment. I am speaking “ now of a Reformed Parliament, and I do not believe “ that, judging from its course for several successive years, “ the Reformed Parliament has promoted economy. This “ I know, that the Government with which I have been “ connected, as well as other Governments, have had great “ difficulty in prosperous times, and when the hot fit of “ expenditure was on the House of Commons, in resisting “ the desire of the House to increase the expenditure. “ Therefore, though I do not deny that when there is “ a pressure upon some classes, there is a warm desire for “ immediate retrenchment; yet I have more confidence “ in the progressive, reflective retrenchment of a Govern- “ ment than I have in the varying vacillating policy of “ the House of Commons, with regard to a reduction of “ expenditure.” (March 12, 1850.)

Now this opinion of Sir Robert Peel's of his own experience, is extremely valuable; and more especially is it so from the circumstance that it was made when only incidentally bearing upon the topic under discussion. The merits of the House of Commons was not the point at issue. The question was as to the best means of effecting retrenchment in the national expenditure. It was sought to pledge the House by a resolution to effect this; when Sir Robert Peel affirmed, on his own experience, and no one ventured to assert a different experience, that "the House of Commons is very apt to have hot and cold fits of saving, that when the hot fit is upon them the Government have very great difficulty in resisting an increase of expenditure, that he has no confidence in the varying, vacillating policy of the House of Commons with regard to a reduction of expenditure."

The treatment of the Slavery question affords a striking example of these "hot and cold fits." When the "hot fit" prevailed, twenty millions were not too much to give to get quit altogether of Slavery;—when the "cold fit" prevailed, all their abomination of Slavery and the Slave Trade vanished away; and nothing could restrain them from passing an Act, which an able defender of the African squadron (Lieutenant Yule) declares "might well have been entitled A Bill for the better promotion of Slavery and the Slave Trade in south latitude."

The treatment of Ireland affords another instance of these "hot and cold fits" of parsimony and generosity. Two years after the Reform Bill became law, a Government Commission made a most searching inquiry, followed up by an able and elaborate report, into the condition of the Irish poor. Then, for the first time, was revealed to the British Parliament the full, frightful extent of Irish destitution. Then, for the first time, were told up, in an

official report, the aggregate numbers of human beings—subjects of the British Crown—amounting to 2,385,000, who were in “a state always bordering upon starvation, “and sometimes dying by hundreds from its effects.” Then was the warning held out of the precarious nature of the potato crop; then were various efficacious and practicable suggestions made by these Commissioners for remedying evils, at once so appalling to a Christian’s heart, and so full of danger and disgrace to the British nation. The Report was laid upon the table of the Reformed House of Commons in 1835. How was it dealt with? An outlay THEN of some fifteen or sixteen millions would have effectually carried out the wise suggestions of the Commissioners, and THEN such an outlay would not only have permanently ameliorated the condition of the Irish poor, but would have been returned with usurious interest into the Imperial Treasury. But, then, alas! the “cold “fit” was on this Reformed Assembly. For twelve long years this Report remained a dead letter: almost nothing, certainly nothing effectual, was done in accordance with its recommendations. At last came the long-predicted general failure of the potato crop, which before had only been partial. Famine in its direst form spread itself over the devoted land. Then came the “hot fit.” Eleven millions were in one year squandered upon Ireland! Vast as the sum appears, it only afforded provisional relief. A sum, which, had it been given in time, would have diminished half the calamity, and done much to prevent the possibility of its recurrence, has literally hardly left a single trace of permanent improvement in any part of the country. Whilst many, who will gratefully testify to the generous sympathy, which granted it, will, nevertheless, testify to the permanent mischiefs which have resulted from the ill-considered mode of its application. Since

then, the "cold fit" has returned. Assistance has been dealt out with a niggardly hand: to those dying of hunger, aid has been afforded, just sufficient to support them for a season, but *only* for a season; no aid has been given, sufficient to afford *permanent* relief, or to enable the sufferers to better their future condition.

The House of Commons soon, however, got weary of these provisional Irish grants; but still more weary of Irish importunity. Distress in England raised the doubt as to how far it was just any longer to send large sums to Ireland. Then it was some demon tossed up the idea of an Irish Poor Law, based on the English model. "Property," it was said, "has its duties as well as its rights." "Irish property must support Irish poverty." Good. No propositions can be, in the abstract, more undeniable. But the distress in Ireland was occasioned by the small amount of property existing there in proportion to the population. "I consider it," said Lord John Russell, July 28, 1848, "as one of the great misfortunes of Ireland that the population has gone on increasing without a proportionate increase in the means of subsistence and comfort." The great cause, then, of Irish misery and starvation in the worst districts (comprising, in the south and west, far the larger portion of the soil) was the inadequacy of the means possessed by the owners of that soil to employ those who dwelt upon it. In those districts where tolerably rich landlords existed, no Poor Law was needed; in such, a Poor Law was nearly sure to work well. Now, the necessity for doing something arose, not from the condition of the prosperous, but of the impoverished districts; and the Reformed House of Commons adapted their legislation to the prosperous districts instead of to the impoverished.

To pass a law for throwing the burden of supporting the

poor upon those whose means were *notoriously* inadequate to sustain it, was to endeavour to practise a cheat upon those for whose necessities you were pretending to provide. The result was predicted at the time; and the prediction has been most fully accomplished—those on whom the obligation was imposed have been ruined, and those whose wants were not relieved have had their wretchedness aggravated, by disappointing the expectations which were excited. Where a remedy was not wanted, the law worked well; but where the remedy was most grievously wanted, it has utterly and completely failed.

“Irish property ought to support Irish poverty.” Good; but what was the only chance of realizing this *dictum*? Was it to pass a measure, the certain effect of which would be to destroy, or essentially to diminish, that *property* (already, as Lord John Russell admitted, far from sufficient) by which that *poverty* was to be supported? Yet this is what the Reformed Parliament did, in defiance of warnings and protestations—warnings even from such men as Archbishop Whately (the head of the Poor Commissioners in 1833, already mentioned). The effects have turned out such as were foretold. In many cases the value of Irish estates has been wholly destroyed: in many it has been diminished two-thirds, or one-half—the owners, from no faults of their own, have been completely overwhelmed, and been wholly unable to discharge the duties which were thus unjustifiably thrust upon them. They are being rapidly swept off from the face of the country, and the “great boon” to Ireland has been a measure to facilitate the process. Their starving neighbours are disappearing with them. Death and emigration (but death far more than emigration) have been the agents of depopulation. Extensive districts, formerly cultivated and peopled, are entirely abandoned; and it is no poetical exaggeration,

but too literally true, to say—"You have made a solitude, and you call it peace."

In those districts where the people still linger on, the scenes of misery which present themselves are beyond human imagination to conceive, except by those whose own eyes have witnessed these horrors. The debate of the 19th of last March too surely proves that this statement is not overdrawn.

"Irish property must support Irish poverty." Good; but the only chance of realizing this *dictum* was *to have done the utmost to add to the value of that property which was to be called upon to support that poverty*. The recommendations of the Poor Commission should have been effectively carried out: then Irish wealth would have been *added* to, and the prosperity of the whole British nation would have been increased: expensive armies would have been no longer needed, nor skill in putting down rebellion: and *then, when sufficient property* had been created to be able to support the *poverty* of the land, honestly, reasonably, and justly it might have been called upon to fulfil its duties; and well-cultivated fields, teeming with life and industry, would have blessed such righteous efforts.

But the Irish Poor Law was the worst and most disastrous expedient for getting rid of a difficulty, ever resorted to by a British Legislature. It was acting like a man, who tries to get rid of an importunate creditor, by giving him a cheque upon a bankrupt banker. The trick may succeed for the moment; and, if a nation, like a swindler, could run away, it might in this world escape retribution. But England cannot flee! Her importunate creditors are still knocking at her door: she is still, in very shame, constrained to dole out to them dribblets of provisional relief: they still continue a source of disgrace and weakness to the

Empire, when they might have been its glory and its strength.

Let us now briefly consider the sort of controul which the Reformed House of Commons has exercised over our Foreign Policy. For forty years and upwards there was one great fundamental principle, by which that policy was guided. During that period it received the approbation of all parties: on no other great principle had such perfect unanimity prevailed within the walls of Parliament. Three weeks before the Ministers, who passed the Reform Act, were installed in office, three of the leading ones—Lords Grey, Lansdowne, and Palmerston—took occasion to lay down, in the clearest and most forcible language, this principle, which may be thus enunciated, in the language of Lord Palmerston:—"Every nation has a right to regulate its internal affairs as it pleases, so long as it injures not its neighbours;" or, in other words, "no nation has a right forcibly to interfere in the internal concerns of an independent State, unless it has a right of war against that State." This is the one great principle on which depends the stability of the European family of nations. Disregard and defy it, and the weaker States have no guarantee whatever against absorption by the stronger. Throughout the Revolutionary war, Great Britain ever maintained that the eternal laws of justice gave it the most prominent place in the code of international law. When the Holy Alliance set it at nought, by their successive attacks on the newly established constitutional Governments of Naples, Piedmont, and Spain, it was asserted, with almost frantick vehemence, by the unanimous voice of the British Government and people. On no one occasion was it violated, whilst the Parliament remained unreformed. But no long time elapsed after the Whig Ministers obtained office, when, backed by a

Reformed House of Commons, they dealt with principles, as best suited their convenience at the moment. This principle, in defence of which Great Britain had so long contended, was accordingly flung away. The kingdom of the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Turkey, Sicily, each in their turn, had their internal affairs *forcibly* interfered with by Great Britain, without any pretence being made, that they had in any way affronted or injured her; and thus, in the eyes of the civilized world has been thrown away, that moral influence, "the main source and secret of her strength," whereby she had gained the reputation of real integrity of purpose, and inflexible consistency of principle.

Disregard of first principles is one of the great defects stamped on the character of the Reformed House of Commons. No one feels confidence in the future. Instability is its leading characteristic, as it must be of every individual, and every Body taking expediency, instead of principle, as a guide. The Statesmen in it who have taken the most prominent part have drawn their rule of conduct from what they have called "the force of existing circumstances." Such evidently was Lord John Russell's idea of a Statesman's duty before the Act passed; and doubtless he modelled his scheme in conformity with that idea. Thus, in 1827, (May 3), he avowedly, in his place in Parliament, abandoned the cause of Reform, because the people had become indifferent to it; but in 1830, he again became its advocate, because the people had changed their minds, and became desirous for it. Just as in 1840, he proposed a fixed duty on foreign corn; and in 1846, he insisted on all duty being permanently abolished. Now the permanent *status* of the country could not have so completely changed in so short a time, as to render *that* advisable in 1840, which was not advisable in 1846. But the sentiments of the people were either changed, or were

supposed to have changed, and *that* was what Lord John deemed sufficient reason for changing upon a question, which ought to have been viewed with a Statesman's eye, to have been decided by considerations of the general *permanent* good; but above all, which ought not to have been definitely settled on the ground of popular *will*, at a moment when that will was influenced by an unusual scarcity, and fanned into excitement by the exaggerated representations of designing agitators.

Precisely the same has it been with Lord John's rival, Sir Robert Peel. In a position in which he ought to have led, he has followed, instead of directing, events.

"There is no single high principle," says the "*Times*," so long ago as July 31, 1844, "of which Sir Robert Peel is the representative. He is the representative of a majority of the House of Commons, as they are the representatives of the majority of those who are rated at 10% a-year and upwards. . . . We cannot but regard it as a most serious evil for the country, that the man, who holds the highest political post, should be unable to raise the moral tone of the people."

Who can deny the fidelity of this portrait, or the truth of this statement? Yet, who can doubt that the talents of this celebrated man would have illustrated nobler principles, had he been sustained by men urging him on to higher and better aspirations, instead of being dragged down by men, themselves dragged down below their natural level, by similar influences with himself?

Every constituency created by the Reform Act, has intermingled with it those who are more or less accessible to bribery and corruption. And, as we have said, public opinion preponderates on that side, according to which the waverers for the time attach themselves; just so is it in electioneering contests with parties nearly equally balanced;

the bribable section of the constituency decides the election. A single vote which, in the early part of the day is of no appreciable value, because it is only one amongst hundreds, becomes within half-an-hour of the close of the poll, in a nicely-balanced contest, of enormous value, when it remains but one amongst tens, or perhaps amongst units. Thus the fate of an election constantly depends on the most corruptible of the electors.

That bribery prevails to a fearful extent under the existing system is beyond a doubt; and the idea that a numerous constituency would not be so open to bribery as a small one is proved to be erroneous. However upright, honest, and patriotick, a man may really be; however ignorant of the corrupt practices by which he may have been returned, and however strongly he might condemn them, were he made aware of their existence, still, that is a state of things which lies between a man and his own conscience; it may exist, or it may not; in the publick eye the taint is upon him, he may be innocent, but he has no opportunity of proving that he is so. At the last general election the bribery in the city was notorious. The Premier has no means of proving his innocence; and he, like other Members, perforce must remain suspected.

It is an alarming position for a country to be placed in, when such an inherent and unavoidable plague-spot rests upon the characters of its Representatives,—when there is hardly one amongst them who can raise his head aloft, and, by being placed above suspicion, can assume to himself the right of giving a purer and more elevated tone to those with whom he is associated. It is in this more than in any other point, in which consists the change for the worse in the Reformed House of Commons; all have been reduced to the same level, and that level a low one.

No wonder, then, that it is proclaimed in the midst of

such an assembly, and that no one dares to contradict it, that "the people have no confidence in the representation." No wonder that so loud an outcry should have arisen for a change, and that those who vote against it nevertheless point to the moment when it must be made.

It is the uncompromising assertion of his principles, on all occasions, fitting or unfitting, which in a certain degree bears out the assertion of "The Times," that Mr. Roebuck alone stands free from the suspicion either of bribery or of servility. It is the want of fixed principles which has broken up the House of Commons into such a variety of parties—which has produced the unexampled spectacle of a Government so weak that it can hardly stand, yet fixed in office from the greater weakness of its opponents. It is, indeed, difficult for men to cohere, who are *all* more or less under the influence of constituencies which act as drags upon their consistency and honour.

It is true that sometimes the highest and noblest principles are proclaimed and urged as motives of conduct. It was, indeed, refreshing to hear from the lips of the First Minister of the Crown an appeal to keep up the African squadron, on the ground that "in the high, the Christian, and the moral character of the nation, is to be found the main source and secret of its strength; and that if we are no longer permitted to take a lead in the champion-ship against the curse and crime of Slavery, we can no longer venture to expect those blessings which, of God's providence, we enjoy." Blessed and elevating language! Would to God that it could have been heard with satisfaction, unmingled with alloy! But, alas! from those self-same lips (in spite of the most solemn warnings), on a previous occasion, had fallen words of strongest recommendation to pass that very Sugar Bill, of which it has been most truly said, that it "might well have been entitled A

“ Bill for the better promotion of Slavery and the Slave Trade in south latitude.” Do we not trace, in this perverse blindness to the truth, the baneful influence of the constituencies prevailing over the better genius of the man ?

But while the Reformed constituencies have thus helped to lower men, who might otherwise have been truly great, they have, with only a very few exceptions, sent no men of really great ability to Parliament. Messrs. Cobden and Bright are pre-eminently the men who may be considered as representing the spirit of the Reform Act. There are none who, in their peculiar sphere, fill so large a space in the public mind. They generally are supporters of Lord John Russell's Government ; at least they are so whenever its existence is really in danger. It must be, therefore, the interest of the Premier to conciliate them ; and yet how contemptuously does he speak of their claims to rank as statesmen, influencing the destinies of their country on great questions of State policy. “ What I have to find fault with,” said Lord John, (June 21, 1849,) “ in the Hon. Member for Manchester, and those who agree with him, is that they are so exceedingly narrow-minded. Get them upon the subjects with which they are particularly conversant, and I listen with great admiration to their extensive knowledge and acute ability ; but when we come to discuss large questions, such as concern the fortune of our Empire, then I see that they have an intellect and understanding bound up in such a narrow round, that it is quite impossible to get them to understand the great principles on which our ancestors founded the Constitution of this country, and which we, their successors, humbly admire, and desire to follow.”

The imperfections of the Reformed House of Commons,

then, mainly are, that it too “quickly and readily” responds to a publick opinion, itself too easily acted upon by designing agitators for their own selfish ends—that scarcely any of its Members are free from the undue pressure of their constituents, whereby they are prevented from acting upon their own unbiassed judgments as to what is for the general good—that the Ministers of the Crown are impeded in following any consistent course of policy, sometimes hurried in one direction, sometimes in another. The results of these imperfections have been, that, while the most important interests of the country have been made the subjects of rash experiments, the great masses of the poorer classes, as well as those more immediately above them, have not kept pace with the more wealthy classes in comfort and prosperity—that some of those interests have been reduced to ruin—that for years all aid was denied to suffering humanity in Ireland, when it might have been made productive of immense *permanent* relief to the sufferers themselves, at the same time that it consolidated and increased the general prosperity of the Empire—that vast sums have been lavishly given and disastrously squandered, when too late, and when it was impossible for them to do more than afford a temporary palliation—that by setting up the principle of expediency in our Foreign relations, and abandoning that of right and justice, for which this country had contended for forty years, through evil report and good report, the honour of the country has been tarnished in the eyes of foreign nations—that all publick confidence in publick men has been completely destroyed; and, lastly, that the people generally, as the men of the people affirm, have “no confidence in the existing state of “the national representation.”

Such are some few—and only some few—of the most

glaring defects of the present system ; and such some few —*and only some few*—of the most disastrous results which that system has naturally produced.

No one defends it as it is. Radicals and Chartists denounce it ; Whigs can say no more for it than “ it *was* ” once “ adapted to the institutions of the country, and the “ wishes of the people.” Conservatives and Tories say,—“ Better not alter it, bad as it is, you will only make it “ worse.”

And, most assuredly, if no other alteration can be devised, than those which are now pressed on publick attention, viz., a still further extension of the suffrage, and voting by ballot, it will not only be going from bad to worse, but that worse must lead to something far worse beyond it. Doubtless very many of those who now possess the lowest franchise are honest, incorruptible men : but it is equally certain, that the corrupt and bribable portion of the constituency are to be chiefly, if not exclusively found, amongst those who possess the lowest franchise. To give them the right of voting to a lower value than 10*l.* is to multiply those voters, whose circumstances render them more liable to be tempted by a money bribe, than richer members of the community : and if, already, the democratical power in the State is so strong, as to be made the pretext for further concession, the lowering the franchise, whereby that power would be increased, could only serve to confer increased ability for demanding and obtaining more and more, till it must end in every member of the House of Commons being nominated by universal suffrage.

Yet what opinion does Lord John Russell express respecting this vast extension ? “ The Honourable and “ Learned Member for Sheffield (Mr. Roebuck) says, ‘ Why “ ‘ should you distrust the people ? Why not have confi-

“ ‘dence in the whole body of the people and admit them
 “ ‘to vote for Members of Parliament?’ Now, it may
 “ seem very ungenerous in me to say that I do not feel
 “ confidence in the great body of the people; and this
 “ too, when it is declared by the Member for Sheffield
 “ that when the working classes are praised by one side of
 “ the House, we are always sure to hear that praise
 “ echoed on the other. Now, I admit that the conduct of
 “ the working classes is deserving of our praise, and that,
 “ too, on every occasion, when we had an opportunity of
 “ judging of their general conduct: but, going from that
 “ conduct, should it follow, that a suffrage almost universal
 “ should give to them the power of electing Members of
 “ Parliament, and that if they had that power their choice
 “ would always be a wise one? Am I to say that, because
 “ they are deserving, that the consequence should be that
 “ they should elect the Members of this House, by whom
 “ are to be determined all questions, relating to this great
 “ Empire? That to them should be intrusted the preser-
 “ vation of our Constitution and of this Empire, in the
 “ direction of which this House has so great a part?
 “ Candidly, I must say, that I think that they should not.
 “ I believe that they would be misled, and I have seen
 “ instances, which induce me to think so.”

These are sentiments worthy of a British statesman. The elevated posts which the Noble Lord has so long filled in Her Majesty's Government must have given him a just idea of the magnitude and complexity of those Imperial questions, with which he must constantly be compelled to deal. Few can be better able to tell how often the combinations of the wisest and most experienced statesmen—men, who have passed their lives in deliberately weighing, and endeavouring to enfold in one comprehensive grasp, the great and awful problems which they are

called upon to solve—have ended in failure and disappointment. None can know better than the Noble Lord, how few statesmen have been successful in conceiving and carrying out a great system of State policy, operating to produce definite and foreseen results. Doubtless it was the effect of these sad and laborious experiences, which drew from the inmost workings of his mind his publick complaint of “the narrow intellects” of a Cobden and a Bright. Doubtless it was these experiences which drew from him that glorious sentiment, which has been already quoted, “That, in the high, the Christian, and the moral character of the nation, is to be found the main source and secret of her strength.”

But is it not marvellous that a statesman, who can thus nobly feel, and thus boldly speak, who thinks that if the power of electing every Member of Parliament were confided to the universal, or nearly universal suffrage of the people, “their choice would not always be a wise one”—who “believes that they would be misled,” because “he has seen instances which induce him to think so,”—is it not marvellous that such a statesman should have been the one to hand over the preponderating influence in every borough constituency throughout the kingdom, to the possessors of a 10*l.* franchise? But is it not still more marvellous that he should even now openly avow, that he looks forward to the time when he shall propose, that “the 10*l.* value, shall no longer be the limit of voting in this country.”

If the present popular constituencies elect, as their best specimens, men whose intellect is of such “a narrow round” as to render them unable even to “understand the great principles on which our ancestors founded the constitution of this country,” it may well be retorted upon Lord John Russell, that, however much he, as

“one of the successors of those ancestors,” may “admire those principles, and endeavour to follow them,” he will be utterly unsuccessful in his endeavours, if they should end in establishing democracy, as the overwhelming weight in the scale, to drag down the nicely poised balance of the British Constitution. If, under the present system, the too popular tendencies of every constituency have served but to produce disastrous results, surely the remedy for the evil cannot be by heaping fuel on the flames, and increasing the democratic power over the Lower House of Parliament.

Still less is that remedy to be found in the un-English scheme of the Ballot—a measure which would probably prove perfectly nugatory, as it has done in many places where it has been tried, but which the great majority of the electors would never allow so effectually to operate in concealing their votes, as either, on the one hand, to deprive them of the power of exercising a controul over their Members, or, on the other, to deprive them, if ready to take it, of the proffered bribe.

But the Ballot would be directly opposed to the principle by which the Reform Act was justified: that principle was, that the franchise was a *trust*, and not a *property*: had it been a property it could not have been honestly taken away without a fair compensation; and that being a *trust*, and merely a *trust* for the general benefit of the whole community, it was competent for the Legislature to resume it, and to confer it on those whom they deemed more likely to discharge it for the public good. If this principle be not a true one, then was the Reform Act nothing else but a flagrant robbery and injustice. Admitting then the elective franchise to be a *trust*, I ask, who ever heard of relieving a trustee from all responsibility in the exercise of his trusteeship?

A trust involving no responsibility is a contradiction in terms. To deny that responsibility attaches to its exercise is, in fact, to deny that it is a trust.

The advocates of the Ballot, therefore, are in this dilemma; *either* the present possessors of the franchise are the receivers of stolen goods, and have no title to protection in disposing of them, *or* they are in the position of trustees, responsible to their country for the fulfilment of the trust with which that country has invested them, and consequently ought to exercise it, responsible to the controul of public opinion.

But, however all this may be, we may rest assured that the Ballot, as a scheme for relieving Members of the House of Commons from the undue influence of their constituents, or for encouraging more elevating sentiments than now prevail there, is one of the most futile that ever entered into the mind of man. Noble and generous feelings were never known to spring from the murky depths of mystery and concealment.

Dismissing, then, these two propositions (the only ones, however, which have yet been made for improving the character of the Reformed House of Commons,) it will be well to ascertain what were the principles on which that House was constituted by the authors of its present construction.

First and foremost, then, we are told by Lord John Russell,* that the great objects of the framers of the Reform Act were, that the House of Commons should be so “modelled as in future to be deserving of the “confidence and a mirror of the sentiments of the “people.” There is an ambiguity in this word *people*, which makes the meaning of this sentence somewhat

* Letter to the Electors of Stroud, 1837.

obscure. If a numerical majority, or a constituency speaking the sentiments of a numerical majority of the people, be meant; then we may rest assured that the framers of the Reform Act aimed at two objects essentially incompatible with each other,—that they laboured under a sad delusion; for they evidently imagined that a House of Commons, which was “a mirror “of the sentiments of the people,” must necessarily be “deserving of their confidence;” whereas, it may with great certainty be predicated of any legislative body, reflecting with the fidelity of a “mirror” the vacillating opinions of the democratick portion of the community, that it would assuredly, before long, lose the confidence of those very persons whose sentiments it reflected. Lord John himself says, that even in “electing Members of “Parliament their choice would not always be a wise “one;” then why is it to be supposed that, on “questions “relating to this great Empire,” their sentiments, which the House of Commons “mirrored,” would always be stamped with wisdom? In this sense then, according to Lord John’s own showing, his Reform Act was based on an erroneous principle.

But if the word “people” be meant to imply all the various classes and different interests which make up this entire nation, then Lord John tells us, that in such a country as this, “where there exists every variety “of interest and every diversity of profession; where “wealth is not confined to one class—the landed, manu- “facturing, or commercial; where ingenuity has done “its utmost, and civilization is extremely artificial;” in such a country “it is nearly if not impossible to “give an adequate representation of the people at large.” The last meaning, therefore, cannot be the correct one,

for, if it were, the framers of the Reform Act would have been labouring after an object which, in their opinion, was “nearly if not impossible” of attainment.

The design of the framers of that Act, then, must have been to make the House of Commons a “mirror of the “sentiments” of a numerical majority of the people. The design has been very tolerably successful; for, although the wealthy and intellectual members of the different classes—“landed, manufacturing, and commercial”—have indeed had votes, yet those votes have been swamped, more or less, *in each constituency*, by those of the lower value. Thus has a vast power been lodged in the least intellectual and the most dependent portion of the voters; a power which has a strong tendency to increase, and ultimately to absorb all the power of the State. To such a power, when fully developed, the Throne and the Peerage can offer no effectual resistance. If allowed to increase, it must become all in all, till it reigns uncontrolled. But so soon as it thus becomes exempted from any necessity of being right, by being able to make its mere *will* prevail, without a struggle, so soon it will become intolerant and oppressive. “It is not,” says an able writer in the “*Edinburgh Review*,” (No. 168, p. 464) “the uncontrolled ascendancy of *popular* power, but of “*any* power which is formidable.” “What does it signify,” says another able writer, “whether my liberty of “conscience or of action is oppressed by a people, or a “Pope? The will of either cannot change the nature of “right and wrong, truth and falsehood.”*

It is not, therefore, to be wondered at that an Assembly, framed for the attainment of such an object, should have no foundation either on fixed principles, or prescriptive

* “What has Religion to do with Politics?” by D. R. Morier, p. 112.

rights; that it should be destitute of all claim to veneration on the score of ancient customs or recollections; that it can only be defended on the ground of present expediency, and (as Lord John defended it on Mr. Hume's motion, Feb. 28, 1850,) by balancing defective theories against each other. It is not to be wondered at, that, as the franchise was conferred on property and numbers, on each of which was imposed an arbitrary limit, (not because it was just, but because it was said to be "necessary to "draw the line somewhere,") that both should be imperfectly represented; for whilst numbers, in the proportion of five to one, are excluded from the franchise, the numbers which are admitted generally overwhelm the property.

On these elements, then, the elective franchise rests, selected and combined, in their present state, for the avowed purpose, not of giving property its fair share in the representation, but of making that representation "a mirror of "the sentiments of the people."

But, surely, these are not the true principles on which a legislative body ought to be constructed; surely this is not the object which should be had exclusively, or even principally, in view. With that strange inconsistency, (whether attributable to the character of the man, or "the force of existing circumstances,") Lord John Russell, in one of his more recent speeches (June 21, 1848) has himself put forth principles essentially different. "In my "opinion," he said, "that which not only every man of "full age, but the whole population have a right to, is the "best government, and the best kind of representation, "which it is possible for the Legislature to give them. "The main object of our institutions is good government "and the welfare of the people."

Here, then, he distinctly lays down the true principles

which should regulate the construction of such a legislative body as the House of Commons. But they are, indeed, very opposite to those principles, on which he says the framers of the Reform Bill acted. Then "the right of the whole population to the best government, which it was possible for the Legislature to give them," was deemed a lesser right than the right of some certain portion of the community, arbitrarily selected, yet sufficiently numerous to admit of being designated as "the people," to a representation "mirroring" their sentiments and feelings. Surely that man takes a very narrow view as to the best means of obtaining the "best possible government," who thinks that a "majority of 10% householders" are the instruments best adapted to securing that end.

That majority is, as past experience has proved, constantly liable to be intimidated by the mass of non-electors below them—no inconsiderable portion of that majority (as has been proved before Committees of the House of Commons) is found to be open to bribery from those above them. Leisure time to study and understand the principles of the Constitution, and great questions of State policy, cannot abound amongst them. Whilst, therefore, it is well that this class should have a share, and even a large share in the choice of representatives, it is not well that they should have, what they now have, a preponderating, and, in many instances, an overwhelming one.

But the great deficiency in the present House of Commons is in men representing principles, selected because they are believed by their electors to be the best men that can be found to give weight to those principles; men who shall be free from the depressing influence of corrupt constituencies, having free play given to their uncompromising and unselfish patriotism, and who may be able to act the

part of impartial umpires, between contending interests—to give a high tone to their colleagues,—to repress what is base, and to encourage what is generous.

This was what in no small degree was effected by the great men who were, before Reform, introduced into the House through the agency of *close* boroughs. “This is a country,” said Lord John Russell, (June 21, 1848,) “which has not only commerce and agriculture, but which has in it men of every kind of information: men who have studied the Constitution of their country. There are many in active, and many not in active life, whose intelligence fits them to be representatives in Parliament, but whose habits do not induce them to seek or qualify themselves for either County representation, or that of such places as Manchester and Birmingham.” It was the close boroughs which constantly sent these sort of men. It is these sort of men, the want of whom is now felt so keenly within its walls; but it is not these sort of men, with very few exceptions, that are sent to Parliament by the 10% constituencies of the smaller boroughs.

To restore, however, the close borough system is utterly hopeless, even were it desirable; but, in truth, its defects were too great to allow of any wish for its restoration. The problem, therefore, to solve is, to devise some scheme whereby similar benefits may be secured without a renewal of similar evils. Yet to introduce any entirely new principle into the composition of the House of Commons would seem too venturous a proposal: not so, to give *expansion* to one which already enters into it.

It has been already pointed out that property and numbers are, with one exception, the only two elements on which the franchise is based. That exception is to

be found in the LEARNING and EDUCATION of the country represented through the Universities.

Is it not, then, a matter of extreme wonder that in a Legislature consisting of six hundred and fifty-six Members, only six should be returned by the *learning* and *education* of the nation? Is it not unaccountable that when the body of the old House of Commons was thrown by the Medeas of the day into their seething cauldron of Reform, in order to infuse into its aged limbs livelier and more vital powers, that it should never have occurred to these daring men to create some constituencies composed exclusively of educated persons above the suspicion of bribery, who would select their representatives for no other motives, than that they believed them to be the best men at once to understand and to promote the Imperial interests of Britain's almost boundless dominions? But is not this still more extraordinary when there existed no need for the creation of such bodies, seeing that they existed already made to their hands; seeing that they are to be found in all the professions to which English gentlemen belong.

In the law, for instance, there are the four Inns of Court—Lincoln's Inn, the Middle and Inner Temples, and Gray's Inn; also the Law Association, composed of the solicitors. The individuals who compose these bodies are all men of education, either deeply versed in the laws of their country, or studying to become so—men not only incapable of descending to accept a bribe, but beyond the suspicion of doing so. Let each of these five bodies return two Members.

Again, in the profession of physic; in the hands of whose members we fearlessly intrust, under God, the lives of ourselves, our wives, and our children, similar corporations are to be found, comprising some of the

ablest, most highly educated and scientific men who have adorned the annals of our country. The College of Physicians, the College of Surgeons, and the Company of Apothecaries, excluding those belonging to the College of Surgeons. Let each of these have the power of returning two members.*

Let art and science also have their representatives. Give two Members to the Royal Society; and two, also, to the Royal Academy, combined with the chartered Society of British Artists, the chartered British Institution, and the Royal Institute of British Architects.

Enlarge likewise the present University representation, without, however, interfering with existing privileges; give to every layman who has taken a degree at either, and who has not a vote under the present system, the right to vote for two representatives: two for Cambridge, and two for Oxford. Give likewise to graduates of the London University, composed of University College and King's College, the right of electing two; to Durham, one; to the Scotch Universities, Edinburgh and Glasgow, one each; to Aberdeen and St. Andrew's united, one; and to the Welsh University of St. David's, one.

Of the learned professions there remains the clergy of the Church of England. They stand in a peculiar position; they are prohibited by law from ever sitting in the House of Commons. Once admitted into Holy Orders, no man can throw off the indelibility of his sacred character: he is excluded for ever from the Lower House of Parliament. The clergy, therefore, have a peculiar claim to be represented in that assembly by Members returned exclusively by themselves. This would be only rendering justice to a most valuable and most important body of

* Voting in person could not be required from these bodies, any more than from those mentioned hereafter.

men, whose temporal interests are constantly being regulated by the Acts of a Parliament of which persons not of their own Church now form no inconsiderable portion. Let therefore every diocese return one Member, and let all the resident clergy in that diocese, whether beneficed or not, have the right of voting: cancelling, however, their right to vote either in boroughs or counties.

Let it not be said that the clergy would thus be called upon to interfere in politicks as they have never done before. Such would not be the case. The right of voting for Members of Parliament would be no new privilege conferred upon them. Numbers of them, now, have votes for the Universities; numbers, as incumbents, have votes for counties; numbers, as 10% householders, have votes for boroughs. But even were it otherwise, it would be no valid reason for refusing to call upon them to exercise an important trust for the publick good; for, as the present Archbishop of Canterbury at a late festival* at the Mansion House, wisely remarked, that "they judged rightly who remembered that while the "clergy were the ministers of religion, they did not cease "to be citizens and patriots."

But in proposing that the clergy of the Church of England should have the elective franchise, it must not be forgotten that the clergy of the Established Church in Scotland are a body of men likely to send worthy representatives; therefore let the ministers of the Scotch Church return four Members. And since, unhappily, that Church has been recently split in two, and many valuable persons have seceded from her, give two Members to the ministers of the Free Church. Give two also to the ministers of the Episcopal Church.

* March 21, 1850. The Banquet given to promote the Industrial Exhibition of all Nations.

Further, as the object in view is to procure good Members of Parliament, representing the *learning* and *education* of all classes, and that the Dissenters of England are a large and respectable body, let their ministers also be required to send their representatives. Let the ministers of the three denominations—Wesleyans, Independents, and Baptists, voting in their separate communities, return each two Members : but let all those who have been regularly installed into the ministry be placed on the same footing as the clergy of the Church of England, and be disqualified from sitting in the House of Commons.

Lastly, as for various and obvious reasons it would be inexpedient to confer such a privilege on officers of the Army and Navy in active employ, yet since the same objections would in no way apply to the *retired* and half-pay officers of the two services, give to those belonging to the Army the right of having four representatives: to the retired and half-pay officers of the Navy, and the Royal Marines, four Members ; and to the retired officers of the East India Company's service, two members. There are no men in the kingdom more intelligent, with more knowledge of the world, or more loyal and independent, than this class of Her Majesty's subjects.

If all these various bodies were thus enfranchised, there would be found in the House of Commons (adding to their number the six present University Members) no less than eighty-four persons who would have been elected, free from the injurious influences to which Members for popular constituencies are necessarily more or less exposed. A set of men so returned would, in all probability, have a moral controul over every other Member. A system would be established the exact converse of the present one—a system encouraging good qualities and restraining bad ones ; a system calculated to purify the moral atmosphere

of the House, to give a consistency to its proceedings and a dignity to its character, which could not fail of strengthening its hold on the best affections of the people.

Such constituencies would aim at returning men who would reflect back honour on themselves. Created, *not because they had any natural right to a share in the representation*, but expressly because they were deemed most likely to select those best fitted for discharging legislative duties, it might be confidently anticipated that there would be largely interspersed in the ranks of the House of Commons men of an elevated morality, and of that "high order of intellect" which "The Times" (March 23, 1850) truly asserts "occurs with increasing "rarity in the puny ranks of democrattick politicians."*

To this scheme, however, one great objection might be raised, which many might consider fatal. The House of Commons is already too numerous: it would never answer to increase its numbers. This, however, need not be done. By doing what has been done in Scotland and Wales, combining in one a certain number of the existing smaller boroughs, and taking away from them their separate Members, a sufficient number of seats might be obtained for the purpose of enfranchisement, without depriving any now possessed of votes of the right of voting. To such an arrangement there can be no objection in principle. The present franchise is only a publick trust; the holder, therefore, can have no indefeasible claim to it if the publick good requires an alteration.

Nor let any one cavil at the diminution which would

* In the text the enfranchisement of *learning* and *education* is alone proposed; but if any such plan should be propounded to the Legislature, it would be well worth while to consider whether the Crown ought not to have the right of nominating four or six official Privy Counsellors, and whether the East India Company, which stands by itself as the Government of a mighty empire, ought not also to be directly represented in the House of Commons.

thus be brought about in the Town representation. To deprive the great towns, the seats of our manufacturing industry, of the privilege granted them by the Reform Act, of returning Members, is what no reasonable man, in these days, could desire, or propose. But while we admire their sudden springing into importance, and the rapidity with which they have become such marked political features in our social system, let us not neglect to profit by the warning, which the pages of history hold out; let us be aware of the fate of the Italian States, who, as a great historian* tells us, “Like many natural bodies, paid the penalty of precocious maturity in untimely decrepitude. Their early greatness and their early decline are,” he says, “principally to be attributed to the same cause,—*the preponderance which the towns acquired in the political system.*”

By the scheme now proposed *learning and education* would obtain their due weight in the legislative scale: the good, without the evil, of close boroughs would be secured, and ballast would be restored to the vessel of the State to keep her steady in stormy times.

Still, however, there would be one thing wanting which existed in the unreformed House of Commons, and which was uprooted in the reformed one, viz., the direct representation of the poor. The theory of the Constitution is, that every subject of the Queen ought to be actually or virtually represented: but stretch the existing representation as you may, it cannot be made to adapt itself to that theory. The really poor are neither actually nor virtually represented.

Now, every proposition to lower the franchise has been one to lower it *in each and every separate* constituency, the effect of which would be that *every* Member would have a more democratical constituency than he has at

* Mr. Macaulay.

present. A general measure of this kind would be fraught with the utmost danger. Still it is not the less desirable that the poor should have some persons chosen by themselves to explain their sentiments and state their grievances to the Legislature. If, then, there were to be taken any established divisions of the country,—as, for example, the twenty-six dioceses into which it is divided, and the old franchise known to the Constitution, of Scot and Lot, were restored, and given to every adult man, who was not otherwise enfranchised, a very useful body of Members would be introduced into the House of Commons, who would be the special representatives of the poor. Six-and-twenty Members, so returned, however injudiciously selected, could not sway to ruin the destinies of this Empire. Their opinions in all matters relating to the poor would be of great value; they would give to the poor man a consequence in the social scale, which might materially help to preserve unbroken the links between poor and rich: most probably, in ordinary times, they would select their representatives from amongst their best friends,—the English country gentlemen.

The power of selecting a limited number of persons as their own representatives might surely be conceded to them with perfect safety to the State: for this is a very different thing from placing, as some propose, all power in the hands of those who cannot have the judgment essential for its use, and who, in times of excitement, would assuredly be deceived, as they always have been deceived, by false friends deluding them for their own ends.

Means might be adopted, by taking the polls simultaneously in a great number of different places, to prevent riot or confusion: the numbers would be too great for bribery to be attempted with the many; and from the places being necessarily distant from each other, at which

the polls would be taken, the value of votes could not be enhanced as the day closed in.

The representation of all places, which it would not be necessary to amalgamate, might remain as it is, save that county qualifications in borough towns, ought to be merged in the borough votes, and ought not to be allowed to swamp the counties, with what are called faggot voters.

It is believed that were this scheme, of which an imperfect outline has here been given, adopted, the British Constitution would have a greater chance of permanency, than that which it now possesses. During the last few years Democracy has made rapid strides. In a new half-peopled country, like the United States of America, almost boundless in extent, and luxuriant in fertility, where back settlements are opened to the ruined, the restless, and the discontented, a Democratic form of government may for a time endure; but in an over-peopled country, like Great Britain, limited in extent, with, as it were, all nature reduced to an artificial state, replete with deeply-rooted prejudices, and long-established habits, with the whole fabric of society depending on *confidence* for its stability, nothing can be more sure than that such a country cannot be ruled by such a fickle power, as Democracy has always proved itself, without soon falling into ruin and confusion.

The plan here submitted is, doubtless, open to some not unfair, and many plausible, objections; but in every question, which mortals have to decide in this world of trial, objections and difficulties are sure to present themselves. At best we have but a choice of evils. What we have to decide is, whether ills of the most appalling kind do not await us, if we still continue our downward course: and whether some scheme, similar to the one here propounded, does not offer from them a fair prospect of escape.

It is surely no unreasonable proposal that the *learning* and *education* of the country should have a *real* share in the representation of the House of Commons. So reasonable is it that Lord John Russell himself assumes it as one requiring no proof. "I trust," said the Noble Lord, "it will be granted to me that the knowledge and intelligence of those most remarkable for knowledge and intelligence ought to be represented."* Would that he would only effectively carry out the principle which he thus so distinctly propounds.

Even Mr. Joseph Hume is alive to this deficiency in the present House of Commons; he justly observes,—“By the law, as it stands, too much attention has been paid to brick and mortar, and too little to brains.” Whilst Mr. W. J. Fox, evidently animated by a similar feeling, makes the somewhat romantick complaint, that “authors and literary men amongst the people” do not possess the elective franchise.

The House of Commons then evidently, in the opinion of its own Members, is in need of something which it has not. Shall that something, then, be sought by plunging deeper and deeper into the democrattick tide, or shall it be sought by calling to its aid the LEARNING, the EDUCATION, and the RELIGION of our country?

April 10, 1850.

P.S. In this pamphlet nothing has been said with respect to the representation of Ireland, which has always been dealt with by the Legislature separately from that of Great Britain.

* “Letter to the Electors of Stroud,” p. 14.

